

GNN Future Releases: Methodology & Core Principals

Introduction

In early September, the GNN team met to discuss future releases. In the context of overall objectives for the products and the business, feature lists were produced on specific timeframes that represent the next 18 months of development work for the team representing a total of 4 discrete releases.

The overall goal set for this exercise was to establish GNN as the leading Internet service for the broad consumer market - in short, to achieve the level of success AOL has in online service in this new arena. GNN will become the "AOL of the Web."

Methodology

All participants came prepared with information and predictions related to the future development of the Internet and the Web in particular. Feature lists were debated, and discussion about the infrastructure and content required to meet the broad objectives was held.

Product management produced a first cut of the release specs as a result of this input, organized by focus area ("constituents") and priorities by focus (needs). The table following summarizes the key concepts that drive the plan.

<i>Constituent</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Needs</i>
Consumer	the end user analogous to the current AOL Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• simple, fast, client software• clear and involving ways to search and navigate the chaotic Web environment• a compelling, "friendly" community that offers both a value-added "editorial" overlay to the Web and new means of communication• a secure, reliable "carrier" service that's affordable and simple to use
AOL / Internal	GNN/AOL and it's "selfish" needs for building, enhancing, and growing the service, from a subscriber and infrastructure perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• powerful marketing tools to attract, retain, and migrate customers• information-gathering mechanisms to allow the targeting of customer segments• back-end infrastructure that provides a scalable platform to grow and innovate
Industry / External	our competitors, third party developers, and affected outside companies that, as appropriate, will look to GNN to lead the way in Web development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access through APIs and related developer tools to allow third-party leverage of GNN's customer base• Technology leadership to advance the standards and capabilities of the Internet

Each feature that we will produce is designed to meet the needs of these groups, and releases are designed to address them in varying levels of priority. Our plan serves these groups in approximately the order above over the proposed releases described here.

The GNN Future Development: Priorities & Time Table grid attached follows this structure, with specific feature groupings added. For each constituent, judgements about the relative importance of need areas were made, and within need areas, features were grouped with an eye toward timing: how soon each area needed to be addressed, and with what additional features.

Timing judgements were influenced by several factors, most importantly how crucial a feature is to meeting a need, competitive pressures, and technology factors that might affect their development and use.

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For example, while ISDN use enhances performance, its availability and the hardware to support it won't be widespread until later in the projected cycle. Therefore, work on it was postponed until the market is "ready" for it, in favor of addressing more near-term needs of constituents.

Additional focus areas

Overriding the specific work on each release are several key areas of focus that flow throughout the plan, including the following:

- *Messaging*: GNN aims to provide the easiest, most robust email and related functionality possible as soon as possible. This is an area of competitive vulnerability today.
- *Performance*: A primary need, and also an area of concern. Work will continue on this factor (client and back end) throughout the cycles.
- *Chat/community*: Current chat functionality is weak. The acquisition of Ubique enables leadership in this area.

Release themes

The following summarizes the "themes" or areas of focus in the releases planned. Though we cite specific "constituents" that are served in the releases, please note that work goes on in all areas in virtually every release. When trade-offs were made to "bound" the releases, they were made on these priority concepts, however. For more detail, see the GNN Future Development: Priorities & Time Table matrix attached.

Immediate (on or before January 15, 1996) - Version 1.2+: Maintenance

This is designed as a near-term effort to address issues already on the agenda prior to initial release.

- Bring performance up to par with the industry leaders
- Iron out bugs and UI problems
- Launch on multiple platforms: Win95 and Mac
- Architectural changes needed for future development
- Include Ubique as a stand alone add-on to bring community building chat capabilities
- Upgrade to GNNpress 1.1

6 Months (April 10, 1996) - Version 2.0: Customer acquisition

AOL experiences have reinforced the importance of attracting and satisfying the maximum number of customers in the shortest possible time. The primary focus in this first major release, therefore, is to overhaul the interface and key modules (email, chat) to produce a simpler, more attractive means of accessing and navigating the Internet than any competitor can offer.

- Additional Interface and performance improvements
- Better searching (Webcrawler, other server-based tools and client-based tools)
- Adoption of AOL-like functionality (Audio prompts, address lists, etc.)
- Enhanced chat, specifically through Ubique integration
- Significantly enhanced mail functions

12 Months (October 1996) - Version 3.0: Service consolidation and emerging technologies

Once the customer base is established and growing, the focus shifts at the margin to applying the AOL model to "back end" processes for customer retention and targeted marketing. Support for emerging standards in Web-based multimedia content is another focus.

- Internal GNN ("selfish") needs
- Basic rich content support (3D, video, animation)
- Third-party development support: API/toolkit definition

18 Months (April 1997) - Version 4.0: Technology leadership

With the GNN customer base by now the largest among comparable services, the opportunity to lead technically is afforded. New tags and native support for advanced Web functionality will enable GNN to lead the industry in new directions. Another focus will be enhanced "personalized" community building.

- Advanced UI controls

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- Advanced rich content support
- Innovations in customizable newsgroup/mail functionality

Market Dynamics and Changing Requirements

The Internet is growing faster than any other market today. New opportunities as yet undreamed of will emerge. The outpouring of new innovations and new competitors will require GNN to constantly change and update its product and product development plans. While we expect the release themes to remain fairly constant, the specific features may change. Product Marketing Management will conduct a review of the requirements quarterly and work with Development to make additions, deletions, and trade-offs in the schedule.